Chapter 33

Ancient Greek philosophical dialogue and contemporary psychology

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SUMMARY

The paper is an attempt to analyze the concept of philosophical dialogue in Ancient Greece. Ancient philosophical dialogue was situated in a particular historical context where no absolute distinction was made between self and other, meaning that individuals were not seen as isolated entities. Further, open dialogue was not seen as constituting the linguistic expression of pre-existing knowledge, but rather as a strategy of searching for truth. The paper argues that this awareness of the interactive, dialogical character of thinking and searching for knowledge, one of the greatest achievements of ancient Greek philosophy, can make an important contribution to contemporary critical psychological theorizing, because philosophical dialogue was not only considered a cognitive adventure, but a means to live a good and virtuous life and of achieve well-being. To put this argument into context this paper will present some similarities and differences between ancient philosophical dialogue and central contemporary dialogical theories (Bakhtin's dialogical approach, cultural-historical psychology). The ultimate aim then is to demonstrate the importance of ancient Greek philosophy for theoretical psychology and to promote a fresh dialogue between the past and present in theoretical psychology.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades many dialogical approaches and theories of dialogical self have appeared. Many thinkers talk about a "dialogical turn" in the human and social sciences (Camic & Joas, 2003). In particular, the works of Michael Bakhtin (1987, 1994) and Lev Vygotsky (1997) have inspired modern researchers who accepted dialogical approaches. While the concept of dialogue is not new and has existed since ancient Greek philosophy much prior to Bakhtin's theory, it has acquired different meanings in different sociohistorical contexts.

In the present paper, I attempt to trace the concept of philosophical dialogue in Ancient Greece and its relationships with several contemporary psychological theories. Such an exploration of ancient philosophical dialogue in the concrete sociohistorical setting of ancient Greek society can inform the conceptualization of dialogue in theoretical psychology today and help reframe it into a new perspective. One of the central questions we need to address in this context will be whether the ancient Greek concept of dialogue is comparable to the concept of dialogue in dialogical approaches in psychology.

Dialogue as a distinctive literary form was used by many ancient thinkers (Zeno of Elea, Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, etc.) (Nikulin, 2006). However, Plato is recognized "as being the best writer of dialogues and as the originator of a whole literary genre … which is a genre of dialogue as speech or discussion involving questions and answers" (Nikoulin, 2006, p. 1). This paper will focus mainly on Plato, because Plato's dialogues

remain the main source of information on ancient philosophical dialogue. Dialogue as literary form is used in different ways in different phases of Plato's life, but an analysis of the differences of the meaning of dialogue in those different periods is beyond the scope of the present paper. In this paper I will focus mainly on evaluating the relevance of Plato's dialogues for contemporary critical psychological theorizing. Four main issues will be discussed. First, I attempt to contextualize the ancient philosophical dialogue in a particular socio-historical setting. Second, I analyze some dimensions of the Bakhtinian interpretation of Plato-Socratic dialogue, in order to demonstrate one of the main influences for modern critical theorizing on dialogue in psychology. Third, I explore another dominant influence on dialogical theorizing in psychology, by looking at the links between Vygotsky's and Plato's views on dialogue. Moreover, I consider several differences between Plato and positivistic psychology.

DIALOGUE IN THE ANCIENT GREEK SOCIO-CULTURAL SETTING

The word "dialogue" comes from the Greek words "logos" and "dia", the latter meaning "through," "between," and "across" (Jenlik & Banathy, 2005). Logos originates from the Greek word "legein," "to speak." Dialogue means the logos (discourse) through other people (Dellis, 2002, p. 109); the discourse that is mediated by the interaction between people. In this sense dialogue is sharing through language practice.

We can distinguish three basic meanings of the concept of "logos" in Ancient Greek philosophy: (a) the first meaning refers to speech; to oral conversation; (b) the second meaning is "dianoia," discursive thinking ("syllogizesthai", "dianoeisthai"); (c) the third refers to objective reason, the rational order of the cosmos (reason as a cosmic force). Plato likened logos to a "living creature" composed by elements in a particular proportion (Plato, 1961a). In neoplatonic tradition dialogue was presented as a vibrant and beautiful cosmos ("microcosm") (Westerink, 1962).

The appearance of philosophical dialogue in Ancient Greece was closely connected to the development of the ancient Greek city-state. The ancient Greek city-state was a political association of people who lived in a particular territorial area. Ancient philosophical dialogue could be understood in the context of the polis as a community of actively participating citizens. In classical ancient Greece the philosophical dialogue was not an external interaction of private, isolated individuals, but a participatory practice of citizens in the political community. During the sixth to the fourth century BC in the Greek city-state democracy flourished (Cartledge, 2009).

A wide range of forms of dialogues existed in the city-states: political, philosophical, dramatic and judicial dialogue had been developed. It is worth mentioning the dialogical mode of drama, the dialogical character of political decision making, the daily market discussions, the symposium talks, etc., because the active participation of citizens in social life was realized through these various forms of dialogue.

There are some important differences between the philosophy and science that appeared in the context of modern bourgeois society (which started to emerge in Renaissance Europe) and the philosophy that appeared in the context of the Greek polis in the fifth century BC. The differences central to our argument have to do with the processes of privatization and individualization in Western society, which have influenced the formation of social sciences, including psychology.

> Historically then, it is possible to trace the gradual emergence of an individualized self to growing questions of privatization, individualization, and objectification. The fledgling discipline of psychology recruited this objectified self to its early investigatory programs" (Stam, 2006, p. 103).

However, the analysis of relationships between people before the rise of the individualized self requires further investigation. Whilst ancient philosophical dialogue differs from contemporary concepts of dialogue (that often have an individualistic orientation), it is not produced by a homogenous or monolithic "non-western concept of personhood that emphasized sociality, the collectivity" (Rasmussen, 2008, p. 36).

In Ancient Greece anyone who did not actively participate in public life was considered ignorant. The English word "idiot" comes from the Ancient Greek word "ideotes," private citizen or individual (from "idios," private, "one's own"). "Idiotes" were people who were concerned only about their individual interest and ignored the needs of the political community. In Ancient Greece, unlike modern Western society, individualism was not regarded as a virtue but as a defect. For Aristotle "man is by nature a political animal" (Aristotle, 1984a). People are seen to only achieve the good life by living as citizens, as participants of a political community. According to Aristotle, contrary to the self-sufficiency of the gods, the well-being of people is relational ("kath-eteron") (Aristotle, 1984b). The well-being of human being is not based on self-sufficiency, but includes as essential relationships with others and their happiness. In Plato's dialogues the well-being of individuals derives from the well-being of his own polis (Jackson, Lycos & Tarrant, 1998). In this sense we can say that ancient Greek polis was characterized by the "blurring of the boundary between public and private," and "privileging of public, political, collective space" (Cartledge, 2009, p. 18).

Hence, in Ancient Greece people did not present themselves as separate (indeed, alienated) individuals, but as active citizens of a local political community. Accordingly, philosophical thinking was not considered the private mental activity of separate individuals, as we have come to see it since Descartes (1998) in Western philosophy. Instead it was seen as participatory, public activity in the community. Philosophy in Ancient Greece was developed as a type of learning that required the participation of the citizens of city-state in the particular philosophical community. Initiation into philosophy was impossible without membership of a particular philosophical school or philosophical tradition. The philosophical training and development of philosophical thinking was not feasible outside the collaborative interaction and dialogue between teachers and their students (listeners).

According to Diogenes Laertius (1925), Protagor was the first philosopher who taught rhetoric and used the art of dialogue. Here dialogue took the form of a competition ("agôn") of words, which were contentious public debates between competing speakers. Dialogue, as used as a tool of mediation by the Sophists, contributed to promoting the idea of the relativity of all things and the abandonment of dogmatic views about eternal, timeless truths. This relativist view of the Sophists implied humility and respect for others.

Socrates was Plato's teacher and a source of inspiration for the majority of Plato's dialogues. Socrates contributed to changing the character of dialogue from that presented by the Sophists, to one that turned it into a means of searching for a moral lifestyle. "I tell you that to let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining both myself and others is

really the very best thing that a man can do, and that life without this sort of examination is not worth living" (Plato, 1961b).

The examination of self and relationships with others is from then on considered an essential activity of human life, because the unexamined life is not seen as worth living. However, as mentioned above the Socratic examination of life was not an individual activity, but it was precisely mediated through sharing and dialogue. Searching for the essential truth was realized through dialogue as a form of community interaction.

Plato's dialogues took place in particular Athenian institutions: the gymnasia, the court and the prison system, education, symposiums. Most participants in Plato's dialogues were masculine, educated and urban. On the margins of dialogues were women, children, slaves, non-Greek speakers (Blondell, 2004). In other words, dialogue was a product of the ancient polis, which was ultimately based on slavery, the subordination of women, the division between Greeks and barbarians, and the denigration of labor.

Crucially, Plato used dialogue as a genre for the presentation of his philosophical ideas. Plato suggested the dialectic method as an art of dialogue that was differentiated from the eristic method used by the Sophists. Contrary to the eristic method, which is aimed solely at winning a debate, the dialectic method focuses on discovering the truth through dialogic examination of different viewpoints and perspectives on some philosophical subject. "Socrates: And him who knows how to ask and answer you would call a dialectician? Hermogens: Yes. That would be his name" (Plato, 1961c, p. 390).

A BAKHTINIAN INTERPRETATION OF SOCRATIC DIALOGUE

Russian literary theorist and philosopher Bakhtin (1895-1975) developed his own version of Socratic dialogue which is quite different from versions presented in traditional philosophical literature. Usually, Plato's dialogues are considered merely as collections of arguments, an understanding that can be criticized as leading to the monologization of dialogue. Bakhtin has challenged this interpretation of Socratic dialogues, offering his version of Socratic dialogue from the perspective his own theory of dialogue as exchange of speaking subjects (Zappen, 2004).

Challenging what he perceived as a common misconception, Bakhtin highlighted that dialogue is not a word game, but a serious joint effort, a collective investigation of crucial questions connected with people's life. He outlines that participants of dialogue should present their true viewpoints and be prepared to modify their deep beliefs as a result of dialogical exchange. Socratic dialogues are presented by Bakhtin as a multi-styled, multi-social-language dialogue; a specific, hybrid combination of "high" investigation of the world and parody borrowed from the "lower" spheres of life and folk-carnival debate (Bakhtin, 1987, p. 25). According to Bakhtin, the deep philosophical Socratic dialogue has carnavalistic dimensions. He writes, "we have laugher, Socratic laughter (reduced to irony), the entire system of Socratic degradations combined with a serious, lofty and the first time truly free investigation of the world, of man and human thought" (Bakhtin, 1987, p. 25).

Bakhtin focused on carnival and the ambivalent images of the participants of Socratic dialogues, which associated closely with Menippean satire. Socrates, as central hero of dialogue, is a "combination of beauty and ugliness" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 132), a personification of the wise ignorance. Bakhtin argues that the Socratic "I am" is not a particular private "I"—"with no witnesses, without any concessions to the voice of a

'third person'" (Bakhtin, 1987, p. 145). According to Bakhtin then, Socratic self-knowledge is not an individual searching, but a dialogical action through the interaction with other participants of dialogue. In other words, Socratic self-consciousness is a communal act. Dialogue is more than the speech and thought of particular persons. Understood in this way ancient philosophical dialogue is a social world of interaction of participants in the community of the polis. Inspired by Socratic dialogue, Bakhtin developed the concept of dialogic truth. "Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110).

In the time since ancient Greek philosophy and the onset of modern philosophy the dialogical approach had been lost and dialogue "finally degenerated into the question-and-answer form of training neophytes (i.e., the catechism)" (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 90). Drawing on his own exploration of Socratic dialogue, Bakhtin introduced a broad concept of open-ended dialogue, which became the central concept of his linguistic theory:

> Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293).

However, there are important differences between Bakhtin's and Plato's concepts of dialogue. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, which has influenced dialogical psychology (Clegg & Salgado, 2011), is based on the acknowledgement of equal rights for all dialogic participants. Such formal equality was impossible in Plato's hierarchical world, where it was taken for granted that, for example, women would not be able to enter dialogue. Also, the mutual respect of participants of Platonic dialogue did not lead to the acknowledgement their equality in the modern meaning of this word. Another difference is that in Plato's dialogues the participants were guided by Socrates, who played a central role and helped them realize and overcome their ignorance. Moreover, the relationships between Socrates and his interlocutors vary in Plato's different dialogues. Matushov, using a conversational analysis found that:

> … dialogue with free people seems radically different than his dialogue with the Slave and all these dialogues are different from Socrates' declaration about his own method. Dialogue with free people was highly ontological, subjectivized, dramatic, improvisational, truth-seeking, challenged Socrates himself, and was unsafe for Socrates' public reputation. Meanwhile the dialogue with the Slave was decontextualized, objectivized, hierarchical, contrived, rigidly pre-designed, pleasing Socrates, non-challenging for Socrates, and safe for Socrates' public reputation" (Matusov, 2009, p. 48).

Without a contextualization of the concept of dialogue it is impossible to understand the differences between ancient philosophical dialogue and contemporary dialogical theories in psychology. To sum up, a reflection on ancient philosophical dialogue was one of the sources of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, which offers theoretical psychology an original way to conceptualize the human psyche.

DIALOGUE FROM PLATO TO VYGOTSKY

The Soviet psychologist Vygotsky (1896-1934) was the founder of cultural historical psychology. Contrary to what critics have labeled as positivist approaches to

psychology (e.g., Baker, 1992; Danziger 1997), which regard psychological phenomena as the sum of simple, homogeneous, separated components or variables (Ratner, 1997), cultural-historical psychology suggests analysis by units that preserve "all the basic characteristics of the whole" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 46). Positivism in psychology is based on the description of psychological phenomena in terms of variables than in terms of human subjects (Baker, 1992). Logical positivism is based on methodological individualism, the claim that "all social phenomena are wholly explainable in terms of facts about individuals" (O'Shaughnessy, 2010, p. 175). For example, Neurath pointed out that "Peoples, states, age groups, religious communities, all are complexes built up of single individuals" (Neurath, 1973, p. 387). In this context such positivist approaches have also been criticized as being reductionist, as they are seen to view complex psychological phenomena to be reducible to their separated components or elements (Ratner, 1997).

At first glance, the very idea of a relationship between Vygotsky's and Plato' views may seem paradoxical. However, if we look deeper, we will find links between Vygotsky's "height psychology" (Yaroshevsky & Gurgenidze, 1997, p. 351; Robbins, 1999, p. v) focused on potential of human development and Plato's "psychagogia" (from Greek words "psyche," soul and "agoge," lead out of), which means "the art of leading the soul through words" (Yunis, 2009, p. 236). "Psychagogia" refers to the formation of people's souls through discourse. More precisely, "psychagogia" is a process through which a person leads another to revelation of knowledge through dialogue. Self-knowledge and personal development can be achieved through dialogue with other people. Plato's dialogues represent a kind of communication between an expert teacher and a less expert learner. Socrates accounts his method "in terms of psychic maieutics, that is the midwifery of the soul" (Grazzini, 2007, p. 130). The teacher as an "intellectual midwife" assists the birth of ideas in the soul of learner. This presents a similarity with Vygotsky's concept of learning and development. Vygotsky's "height psychology" emphasized the potential for development through social collaboration. Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology has emerged as a study of the origin and development of higher mental functions (Veresov, 2010). According to Vygotsky, psychological functions are not products of an individual organism in isolation, but they form in joint, collective activity of an individual with other people. He coined the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Dialogue between the expert teacher and less expert learner is one the dimensions of Vygotsky's concept of zone of proximal development, which brings to mind Plato's concept of "psychic maieutics."

However, there is an essential difference between Plato's concept of "psychic maieutics" and Vygotsky's concept of ZPD. Plato's concept of "psychic maieutics" is based on Plato's theory of innate ideas that exist prior to man's birth and through true learning man can recall them. Vygotsky rejected Plato's nativism adhering to genetic-developmental approach.

We would like to show that it is possible however, to identify similarities between Plato's idea of thinking as dialogue of the soul with itself, and Vygotsky's idea of dialogic nature of higher forms of cognition. Plato defined thinking as "a discourse that the mind carries on with itself about any subject it is considering" (Plato, 1961d). Plato

believed that thinking is a conversation of the soul with itself in considering particular subjects. "[T]hinking and discourse are the same thing, except that what we call thinking is, precisely, the inward dialogue by the mind with itself without spoken sound" (Plato, 1961d, p. 263). Plato argued that there is an internal relationship between thinking and dialogue. Thinking is an inner dialogue of the soul with itself. As outlined earlier, dialogue was presented in Plato's works as a model of the soul in thought. Tracing these ideas we can see that Plato developed a concept of dialogical thinking which is closely associated with Vygotsky's idea of socially shared cognition. This view stands in contrast to the individualistic assumptions of positivistic Western research in traditional psychology (Wertsch & Tulviste, 2005). Plato's approach is contrary to individualistic psychological ways of seeing the world that modern traditional psychology has been criticized for (Parker, 2007), and where thought is seen as connected with the single, isolated, private mind inside individual heads. Hence Plato's suggestion that thinking is develops through dialogue stands in contrast to positivistic psychology, which often regards speech and thinking as separate functions. Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology, as well as Plato's philosophical psychology, is in marked contrast to the methodological individualism of positivistic psychology. Herein we can detect similarities between Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology and Plato's philosophical psychology.

Vygotsky (1997) pointed out that there are no independent, separated functions of thinking and speech, but that instead there are complex psychological systems. Similarly Plato focused on the unity of thinking and dialogue from the perspective of the local community (yet this aspect was lost in modern philosophy and recuperated into the modern concept of individualized). In ancient Greece it was not a straightforward opposition of the "public" versus "private" (Cartledge, 2009, p. 18). In a similar vein Vygotsky (1987) stressed the unity of thinking and speech, of generalization and communication from the perspective of the critique of individualized society.

Further, Plato criticized empiricism and reductionism in a way similar to that of current critical psychology and Vygotsky's approach. For example, "the attempt to separate everything from other things not only strikes a discordant note but amounts to a crude defiance of the philosophical Muse … This isolation of everything from everything else means a complete abolition of all discourse" (Plato, 1961d, pp. 259-260). Critics of mainstream Western psychology (e.g., Parker, 2004) have pointed out that positivist psychology leads exactly to the complete abolition of all discourse which Plato refers to; and in a different social and scientific context, Vygotsky accepted also a dialectical, antireductionist approach to psychological processes.

The relationships between oral speech and written speech are another potential point of convergence of Vygotsky's and Plato's views. According to Plato (1961a), dialogue provides an opportunity to clarify the meaning of written words by asking questions. Plato described real difficulties of understanding of written speech. Difficulties in understanding of written speech have also been analyzed by Vygotsky. According to Vygotsky, written speech is more abstract than oral speech. "It is speech without an interlocutor … it requires an abstraction from the auditory aspects of speech and an abstraction from the interlocutor" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 202-203).

Although there are significant differences between platonic philosophical psychology and cultural-historical psychology, a comparative analysis reveals that there are essential points of convergence of Vygotsky's and Plato's views: a dialectical, antireductionist approach, the idea of dialogic nature of thinking, highlighting the

benefits of oral speech for the development of mind and mutual understanding between people, etc.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, there are important differences between philosophical psychological knowledge in Ancient Greece and contemporary psychology. In Ancient Greece psychology was not a separate scientific discipline with specific subject matter and methods of study. Psychological knowledge had been considered as a branch of philosophy that studied the soul. In this particular scientific context there was not and could not be a developed system of psychological concepts. Danziger (1997) has shown that the conceptual framework of psychological knowledge has changed during the history of the human mind. Further, we should not underestimate the significant differences between the modern Western psychology and the ancient Greek approach to relationships between the private and public domain. "[W]e find that the classical writers look for the expression of the personal core, not in the private or the inner life of the individual, as moderns are inclined to do, but in his public life" (Danziger, 1997, p. 26). In the classical era there was not a gap between the public and individual sphere.

However, in this chapter I aimed to demonstrate that a reflection on ancient philosophical dialogue constitutes a source for inspiration for contemporary critical psychological theorizing. Ancient philosophical dialogue was not an interaction of separated and alienated individuals, but a communal act. The absence of a gap between the public and individual spheres in ancient Greek city-states demonstrates the historical character of psychological functions and thus in turn illustrates the historical limitations of individualistic and positivist psychological ways of seeing the world. The awareness of the dialogical character of thinking and the understanding of dialogue as an open-ended process of interaction of active subjects then makes an important contribution to psychology. Bakhtin was inspired by Socratic dialogue to develop his theory of dialogism, which offers the framework enabling the understanding of crucial issues of theoretical psychology (for example, the dialogic conception of truth).

I also illustrated how a reflection on the relationship between platonic philosophical psychology and Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology can contribute to development of an attractive alternative to the positivistic approach still dominant in psychology. More specifically, Plato's dialogical, antireductionist approach to the human mind provides an alternative to the reductionism and methodological individualism of positivistic psychology. Furthermore, the Platonic concept of "psychagogia," as a process of a revelation of knowledge through dialogue, offers a creative concept that could be developed further in contemporary theoretical psychology. Searching for the essential truth was presented by Plato not as an individual cognitive activity, but mainly as an ongoing dialogic process within a community. Dialogism as a theoretical framework for the understanding of human psyche (Shotter & Billig, 1998; Stam, 2006; Clegg & Salgado, 2011) is then underlined as a strong alternative to the cognitivism which constitutes a leading force in contemporary traditional psychology.

Both the analysis of earlier stages of development of psychology as a science and a dialogue between the past and present of psychological knowledge remains a question for further investigation (Dafermos, 2010). The dialogue between the past and present

of psychological knowledge is "contradictory, multi-speeched and heterogeneous" (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 119).

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